In view of recent interest in lessons learned information systems, I thought it may be helpful to discuss some lessons learned about lessons learned systems. Part of my knowledge stems from being actively involved in the testing, operations & maintenance, and future development of the agency-wide NASA LLIS (Lessons Learned Information System—now called NASA Engineering Network; http://ildp1.nasa.gov/offices/oce/llis/home/), when I was the Knowledge Management Officer at NASA Goddard.

The first key lesson is that capturing, sharing, and accessing lessons learned in a lesson learned information system (LLIS) must be embedded within the normal activities of the employee. That is, capturing lessons and showing value from the lessons learned should be part of a lessons learned process which employees or project teams are required to do. For example, the NASA Program and Project Management “bible” (NPG7120.5D) requires that project teams capture and share lessons learned during each part of their project development life cycle. In addition, when their periodic project team reviews occur, the project team must be willing to explain, if asked by the Review Chairs, how they achieved value by accessing the LLIS. Some organizations, like RWD Technologies, require a lessons learned discussion or document before final project sign-off is done. Thus, if a lessons learned process isn’t embedded within the daily work activities of the employees, then accessing the LLIS may be a rarity since it is something else to do on top of an already full plate.

The second key lesson, relating to the first, involves incorporating a recognition and reward system that encourages people to capture, share, and access lessons learned. American Management Systems (AMS) published the “Best Knews” newsletter on a monthly basis and people would be recognized by whose lesson in the LLIS
was accessed the most in that given month. Some organizations, like The World Bank, Cap Gemini, and others, developed learning and knowledge sharing proficiencies as part of their employee annual job appraisal. Instead of this brute approach perhaps, most people prefer recognition over reward. That is, intrinsic motivation is usually more lasting than extrinsic motivation. Thus, as part of developing a LLIS, a recognition and reward system should be designed or enhanced to include the lessons learned process. Also related to this lesson is the need to continually market the LLIS throughout the organization. User testimonials of how the LLIS saved them time, money, and headaches can be written and dispersed throughout the organization (as well as included on the opening page of the LLIS perhaps). The organization may also want to put up posters about the LLIS around the organization and further circulate information and “serious LLIS anecdotes” on the intranet.

The third key lesson is that many lessons learned information systems fail due to passive analysis and dissemination of the lessons. According to David Aha at the Naval Research Laboratory and Rosina Weber at Drexel University, 70 percent of the lessons learned information systems fail. The main reason is that they are not pro-active in the analysis and dissemination of lessons. At NASA, the LLIS was augmented to address this point by including a user profiling feature so that as new lessons that fit your profile are entered into the system, you would automatically get an email with the link to that new lesson. This relies on a static user profile—a better approach might be to use intelligent agents that could build a dynamic user profile based on the various documents and emails (with privacy provisions) that you are currently working on.

The fourth major lesson deals with the “garbage in-garbage out” phenomenon. If the LLIS is not current, then it won’t be used. Thus, there needs to be at least two important processes established as part of the LLIS. The first involves the entering of a lesson learned and what is deemed a “lesson learned”. The organization may set up a panel of company experts in various disciplines that reviews the lessons submitted on a periodic basis to assess the quality and clarity of the lesson before being accepted for the LLIS. The Jet Propulsion Lab uses this approach whereby their panel of experts meets every two weeks to review the lessons. At NASA Goddard, we used the approach that the submitter of the lesson must have the lesson cleared and approved through their management chain before being considered for the LLIS. The second important process deals with the maintenance and currency of the LLIS. For example, some lessons learned may be outdated and they should be archived. If someone were to get an outdated lesson and follow it, then complications could occur. Thus, there must be a group in charge of the verification of the lessons, as well as perhaps another group in
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